

Opportunity is not merely knocking at the door in Waukegan; it is pounding with a 16-pound sledgehammer, driving home a sense of urgency that would be foolish to ignore.

U.S. Rep. Mark Kirk knows it. So does the Army Corps of Engineers. And so, too, does Mayor Richard Hyde. Their task now is to convince those remaining parties whose help will be needed to finally complete the cleanup of Waukegan Harbor.

Help, in this case, means cash. Federal grant money is available to help finish removing PCBs from the harbor, a milestone that would set the stage to realistically transform the long-troubled city into what Hyde terms "the kingpin of Lake County."

But federal money, to the tune of \$23 million, is available only if local and state sources can put up \$12 million of their own and only if local and state officials submit a plan and have the money lined up within a little over a year, by July of 2007.

Waukegan is in competition for the federal money, made available by the 2002 Great Lakes Legacy Act, with more than two dozen other sites on the U.S. side of the lakes. While winning a slice is no sure thing, officials never have been more optimistic.

"For the first time," says Col. Gary Johnston, Chicago district commander of the Army Corps of Engineers, "we've got all the stars aligned to get this thing where it needs to be."

Among other things, that means that a new water main under the harbor is being installed, deep enough so that it will not interfere with operations to dredge the remaining polychlorinated biphenyls. Industrial PCBs, labeled a probable human carcinogen by the U.S. Environmental Protection Agency, were first found in the harbor 30 years ago. That prompted the EPA to place the harbor on its Superfund list. Crews removed large quantities of the chemical from the harbor in the early 1990s. But various factors prevented the work's completion, and the remaining PCBs stand as a barrier between the city and its ambitious redevelopment vision.

A clean harbor would open up 1,600 lakefront acres. The city's 2003 master plan calls for turning the harbor into the focal point for a dazzling mix of new homes, parks, shops and restaurants. The stakes? One study indicates that this transformation would boost average home values throughout the city by a remarkable \$53,000. What's in the project for anyone living outside of Waukegan? The same report projects that the resurrection of the city's lakefront would boost aggregate Lake County property value by as much as \$800 million, a boon for many, including the public schools, which must rely heavily on property tax. The state, too, would benefit from its share of the sales tax generated in the harbor area.

Which leads to this point. Hyde notes, correctly, that the city cannot raise the needed \$12 million by itself. It needs help from Lake County and the state; both have good reasons to lend a hand.